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SUBJECT: OMAN REACTS TO THE U.S. ELECTIONS

¶1. SUMMARY: As the November 4 presidential election approached, on Election Day, and in the immediate wake of the election results being announced, Omanis at all levels have been remarkably focused on events as they unfolded. In the media, online, and in person at a range of recent events, we have seen a level of engagement that was to some extent unexpected in its intensity and surprising in its frankness. From the cheer that erupted at the Embassy's results-watching breakfast to the headlines since, Omanis have shown themselves firmly - if not always without some reservations - in the Obama camp. END SUMMMARY.

PRINT: OBAMA "NOTHING NEW"... BUT "SAVES THE WORLD"

¶2. Oman's seven daily newspapers (three English, four Arabic; one each in Arabic and English state-owned, the rest private) drew heavily on wire service and other international reporting during the campaign, with coverage increasing in the wake of August's party conventions. Two papers, the "Times of Oman" (English) and "Al-Shabiba" (Arabic), carried content through a special arrangement with The New York Times News Service, with extensive coverage from early in 2008, which was especially useful in providing high-quality material in Arabic. Editorial content in all papers, until election week, was minimal, with the exception of reaction to Barack Obama's July statements regarding the status of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, which prompted private Arabic paper "Al-Watan" (circulation 42,000), for example, to decry the candidate's ties to "special interests" and parroting of the Israeli party line.

¶3. As Election Day approached, Oman's pundits started weighing in. On October 29, state daily "Oman" (circulation 38,000) questioned the extent of candidates' differences:

"In a few days, Americans will choose their next President, even as they suffer real and psychological pressure resulting from the severe economic crisis... If there are differences between the two, there are [from the Arabic perspective] similarities in their positions."

U.S. Election Day was quiet in the Sultante's press, although "Oman" reflected a certain continuing local doubt that much would change, drawing on an October 28 "Los Angeles Times" column by Jonah Goldberg ("Obama's not 'New'").

¶4. In the wake of the elections, however, the tone turned adulatory, although few outlets went as far as the jointly owned "Times of Oman" and "Al-Shabiba", which headlined editorials (in both languages) on November 9, "Obama has saved the US and the world!" Private Arabic daily "Al-Zaman"'s "Obama: The Dream of the World for Change" came close.

On November 7, "Al-Watan" carried a "Letter to the New American President" that said:

"Your victory was not a coincidence; it reflects the change that you called for in the campaign. I, like millions of people, hope that the change you are calling for concentrates not only on the people of America, but looks to the suffering of other people around the world... not merely a slogan, but a real call to return peace to the world after eight years of turmoil."

On November 9, "Al Watan" amplified this theme:

"The new president has made the dream of Martin Luther King come true. At the same time, the white elite transcended ethnic and religious affiliations and accepted a candidate from the African minority. This can only take place in a country of institutions and a political system based on equal opportunity and individual character... Will the new president be able to reform American policy and correct the serious errors committed by the current administration? Will he be able to realize the Palestinian dream in announcing their independent state with its full and fundamental rights? The coming days will tell."

15. Euphoria is tempered, however, as new concerns emerge. On November 9, for example, "Al-Shabiba" called Obama's nominee for chief of staff "Israel's man in the White House," noting the president-elect's ties to supporters of Israel such as Richard Holbrooke.

ONLINE: HOPE AND CAUTION

16. Oman's leading online forum, Al-Sablah (www.omania2.net) posted
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a survey in advance of the elections, with 80 percent of respondents saying they were following the campaign "on a daily basis." Commenters on the Obama side especially praised the candidate's willingness to hold talks with the Iranian leadership and the prospect that his election would reduce the U.S. presence in Iraq; McCain supporters, by contrast, said that a principal cause of their interest in his campaign was his stated support for continuing U.S. guarantees of security in Iraq and regionally. As in print, some posters doubted that much would change after the election no matter the result, although others expressed admiration for the democratic process itself ("I only can applaud and admire the United States for its principles in giving the opportunity to its citizens regardless of their color or former nationality," perhaps a veiled comment on Oman's own relatively minor issues of integrating citizens of non-Arab origin). Other fora explored similar themes, with the (generally less political, although also less guarded) English Sabla (www.englisabla.com/forum) carrying threads that ranged from "Evil Republicans Defeated" (a poll with which 60 percent of respondents agreed) to more measured comments, several of which expressed admiration for John McCain's record, experience, and graceful concession speech.

17. Commenters on both Arabic and English fora cautioned those with too-high expectations, pointing out that the democratic system that enabled the election of a new president also limits his power to enact immediate, sweeping changes. A widely circulated (photoshopped) image of Obama in Omani traditional dress generated both amusement and some genuine identification among Omanis, many of whom have longstanding ties to East Africa through the Sultanate's former presence in Zanzibar and the surrounding area. Post election comments to Emboffs have reflected the same need for the president-elect and USG to tamp expectations.

IN PERSON: "YOU HAVE OVERCOME"

18. In a series of events leading up to the elections, the Ambassador and Emboffs interacted with Omanis at all levels, at events ranging from a series of talks at local colleges and universities to the Embassy's results-watching open house, attended by some 400 guests. The majority expressed a strong preference for

an Obama victory, most commonly citing the break that it would mark with current U.S. policy as the major reason for their support.

¶9. Student audiences were consistently highly interested in the process itself, with averages of more than half of each audience (ranging from 60 to 300 students) saying they were following events closely. The depth and perceptiveness of questions asked by students at each of the Ambassador's appearance were striking, as was the seriousness with which Omani students (most of whom have little or no direct experience with democratic processes) addressed the subject.

¶10. On Election Night itself, the Ambassador hosted a reception for participants in four previous discussion sessions, held over the past year, at which regional events had been debated in the context of the coming election. Whatever the results of the U.S. voting, it was clear that this heterogeneous group of Omani students, businesspeople, academics, and civil society leaders were strongly in favor of the change promised by a Democratic administration. In helping themselves to the campaign buttons on offer, for example, no guest chose to wear a McCain button except in tandem with an Obama one, with the majority preferring an Obama badge on its own.

¶11. By the morning after, when hundreds of Omani and expatriate guests gathered at the Embassy to watch the results come in, that feeling had solidified into virtual unanimity. Cheers marked the announcement, at 8:00 a.m. local time, that Obama was forecast to prevail. Guests congratulated Emboffs on the outcome, saying that it was a clear sign to the world that Americans have overcome racism (one guest recalling the civil rights anthem, saying "you have overcome, not someday, but today") as well as a promise of a "less unilateral" American foreign policy. Those present were struck both by the grace and sincerity of the Republican concession speech and by the eloquence of the president-elect's remarks; when the latter began, the Ambassador has just begun to meet with a group of thirty Omani secondary-school students, who sat silent and totally engaged as Obama addressed the crowd in Chicago.

¶12. The election results genuinely moved many Omanis, many of whom felt compelled to share their views with embassy officers. One Omani emotionally explained how the election proved to her the strength of the American democratic system and demonstrated better than anything its enduring value. Another commented that only a system as flexible as ours could produce such change in government.

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Reflecting on the election's significance closer to home, one Omani gentleman said, "If America can break with its racist past to elect a Black President, then we in the Middle East should be able to overcome our differences to bring peace to our region."

TRANSITION OPPORTUNITIES

¶13. COMMENT: The good feeling engendered by last week's election, along with the developing transition process itself, provides a genuine opening for new dialogue and engagement with Omani audiences. Post will use the chance the changing administration opens up to deepen engagement with local audiences on governance and related issues, using the strong local interest in the new figures on the scene in Washington as a springboard for deeper discussion of and even action on issues that Omanis are only starting to consider in their own context. END COMMENT.

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